



Public Policy:

Current Thinking on Critical Issues

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**Advice to the
*New Administration***

Maryland School of Public Policy

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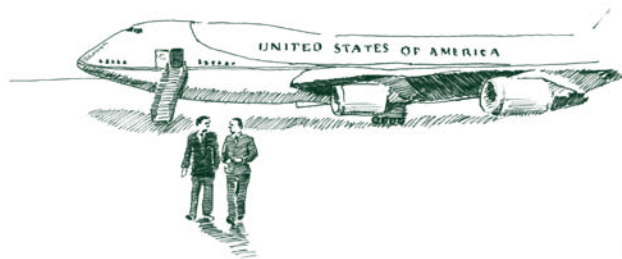
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A Job That Matters

What the President's National Security Adviser Must Do

by I. M. "Mac" Destler and Ivo H. Daalder



The president's national security adviser sits at the crossroads of power. Fourteen men and one woman have held the position since John F. Kennedy and McGeorge Bundy transformed it to focus on current foreign policy business. The job works best when the national security adviser serves as an "honest broker" who connects the president with his senior officials, exposes him to a broad range of policy ideas, protects him from ill-considered decisions and offers him discrete advice. Bundy did this well. So did Brent Scowcroft, who served both Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush

More than half of the 15, however, did their jobs in ways that created serious problems for the administrations in which they served. Henry Kissinger used the position to monopolize power on behalf of Richard Nixon, provoking bitter conflict with those, like the secretary of state, who were shut out of the action. Lyndon Johnson's Walt Rostow and Jimmy Carter's Zbigniew Brzezinski held such strong, even ideological policy views that they were not trusted by senior colleagues to play the honest broker role. When she served as national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice was unable to manage policy making effectively for George W. Bush because the vice president and the secretary of defense circumvented her with impunity. And none of Ronald Reagan's first four national security advisers measured up to the job. Only after the Iran-Contra scandal nearly destroyed his presidency did Reagan turn to professionals—Frank Carlucci, then Colin

Powell—who brought order to the Reagan advisory team, and a happy ending to his foreign policy. In turn, the processes they established contributed to more effective performance by advisers in the Bush 41 and Clinton administrations.

The formal position of "assistant to the president for national security affairs" has no statutory existence; it is the creation of presidents. It dates from 1953, when Dwight D. Eisenhower wanted a senior White House aide to manage his elaborate policy-planning process built around the National Security Council (NSC). Kennedy abolished that formal process, which he found sterile, but kept the position and charged Bundy, its occupant, with managing his daily policy business and connecting him to the broader government. Thus was born a job with enormous potential power. And because, unlike the secretaries of state and defense, its occupant is not subject to Senate confirmation (and hence to the constituencies involved in that process), the president is free to choose whoever he wants, and command the adviser's undivided loyalty.

Two other innovations enhanced the influence of Bundy and his successors. One was the recruitment of a staff of expert senior aides identified with the current president (in place of Eisenhower's much larger civil service staff). The second was the creation of the White House Situation Room, wherein copies of cable communications to and from the State Department and other agencies came directly to this staff, enhancing their capacity to oversee the government.

In subsequent years, the NSC staff has grown—from around 10 under Bundy to over 100 substantive aides today. And the communications technology has, of course, undergone a revolution. But both have remained as vital instruments of presidential foreign policy management, supporting the central role of his national security adviser.

Each president shapes the position to meet his own needs. So a Bundy who was near-ideal for Kennedy had growing difficulties with his successor, Lyndon Johnson. No doubt John McCain or Barack Obama will have his own ideas about the type of service he wants from his national security adviser, not to mention the individual he wants for the job. But to be successful, the incumbent will need to do more than meet the president's immediate needs. Rice has been found wanting because she did not insist (against her president's gut inclinations) on a serious review of the pros and cons of waging war on Iraq, and of how that country would be stabilized and governed once the war was "won." Her successor, Stephen Hadley, did press for an Iraq policy review four years later, resulting in the adoption of the "surge" strategy.

To maximize the chances that his NSC adviser will serve him effectively, the president should look for someone with a bent for policy process—for including the right people, for asking the right questions—over and above her or his commitment to specific policy outcomes. Once chosen, the assistant should quickly recruit a substantive staff (cut back

substantially from the current size) and put in place an interagency process to develop policy options for the president on the most urgent issues. As the incoming assistant does so, however, he or she would do well to consider how Brent Scowcroft, perhaps the best of the 15 national security advisers, built his credibility and his power. He was surrounded by men of great stature and capacity—James Baker, the president’s best friend, as secretary of state, Dick Cheney as defense secretary, and Colin Powell as chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. And his president, George H. W. Bush, had policy experience and a web of international relationships like few if any of his predecessors. Yet this modest, low-profile national security adviser managed to prevail.

The “Scowcroft Formula,” as we label it, had three components.

First and critical was the establishment of trust between him and Bush’s other senior advisers. From the start, Scowcroft saw this as crucial—if he didn’t have their trust, they would go independently to the president and the process would disintegrate. So he met with them regularly, in the formal, cabinet-level “Principals Committee” which he chaired and in informal settings as well, deferring to them on issues where they had clear presidential mandates, but making it clear where the president was on those and

other issues. He was scrupulous in using his daily—often hourly—access to the president to convey their views fully and faithfully. And this became known when they themselves met with Bush, individually or as a group—an access that Scowcroft encouraged. Finally, the adviser enhanced trust by focusing on his job and not intruding on those of his colleagues. Unlike Kissinger—who negotiated himself on Nixon’s primary issues—Scowcroft let Baker do the negotiating (and Cheney run the Pentagon). And he let them take the lead in public exposition of Bush’s policies.

The second element in his formula was to build cooperative policy making deep within the government. The Principals Committee was supported by a Deputies Committee that handled ongoing issues and sudden crises, taking some of the burden from their bosses and framing for them and the president those issues that the deputies could not resolve. They in turn oversaw assistant secretary-level working groups on issues ranging from arms control to the unification of Germany. They made sure analysis was brought to bear on key issues. And they were buttressed by a strong, but relatively small, NSC staff.

Finally, Scowcroft followed the primary rule for all national security advisers—get close to the president, and stay close. He was everywhere

with the president, and their relationship became so close that after both left office, they published a unique dual memoir about their experience. And by the time Bush faced his biggest challenge—Saddam Hussein’s conquest of Kuwait—Scowcroft had so established trust with the president and his peers that he was able to step out of his standard mode of cautious advocacy and take the lead in pressing for a strong, military response.

National security advisers have one tough job. They must give priority to process and advise the president substantively. They must respond to the president but also build trust and process regularity across the administration. But no individual, save the president, will be more important to the success or failure of the next administration’s foreign policy than the next assistant to the president for national security affairs. **P**

This essay is based on Daalder and Destler’s book, *In The Shadow of the Oval Office: From JFK to Bush II: The Presidents’ National Security Advisers*, to be published in 2009.



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